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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000650

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - FOOD INSECURITY LIKELY TO WORSEN

REF: (A) Dushanbe 550

(B) Dushanbe 515

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Alanna Shaikh, EUR/ACE Central Asia Country Assistance Coordinator, visited Tajikistan from April 24 to May 1 to assess humanitarian assistance needs. She confirmed that food security problems persist (reftel A) and that they will worsen in the coming year without intervention by the international community. In meetings with international organizations, NGOs, and government officials, she learned that Tajikistan has made little progress recovering from the past winter. Overseas remittances have kept many families afloat, and small and medium private enterprises remain subject to an unstable economic environment. Tajiks continue to become increasingly frustrated with President Rahmon's government, and they are increasingly willing to voice criticism. End Summary.

#### Food Shortages Will Get Worse

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¶2. (U) Shaikh met with representatives from the World Food Program, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank, Winrock International, Mercy Corps, Save the Children, CARE, and the Ministry of Health. She also visited beneficiaries of EUR/ACE funding. There was strong consensus among the NGOs that major food security problems exist throughout the country. The World Food Program found that 27% of Tajiks are malnourished, and another 27% are in jeopardy of falling into the same category. They estimate that most Tajiks spend between 70 and 80 percent of their income on food. According to CARE, Tajikistan's malnourishment stunting rate (low height-for-age) rivals that of sub-Saharan Africa.

¶3. (U) The outlook for the future is dim. The NGOs and international organizations point to declining production from harvests, continued government emphasis on cotton production, poor irrigation infrastructure, rising food and fuel prices, and decreased real remittances as reasons to expect the situation to deteriorate well into 2009. Despite assurances by government officials to the contrary, our interlocutors generally agreed that Tajikistan is not prepared for the next crisis. The government has passed some laws that address longer term solutions, but there have been no real changes to the country's dysfunctional and inefficient agricultural sector. For now, impoverished farmers need immediate access to inputs (e.g. seeds and fertilizer) to plant food crops for the late fall harvest. Since the government does not have the resources or ability to support the farmers, the international community must step in to provide assistance.

#### Private Sector and Remittances Keep the Country on a Tight Rope

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¶4. (U) Small and medium scale private businesses and remittances from Tajiks working abroad have kept the Tajik economy from

collapsing. The international community's microfinance programs have dispersed more than a billion dollars in loans since independence, and have helped build trust in the banking system. Any positive developments, however, are offset by the deteriorating business climate. A European Bank for Reconstruction and Development representative pointed to the dubious prosecution of Maruf Orifov, the owner of the Orima supermarket chain (reftel B) as being disastrous for investor confidence. While Tajiks living in Qbeing disastrous for investor confidence. While Tajiks living in Russia sent home an estimated \$1.6 billion in 2007, increased inflation reduced the real value of their remittances. Disruptions to the flow of remittances could reduce the country's GDP by up to 20%.

Full of Sound and Fury

15. (SBU) Our interlocutors confirmed our observations that the declining economic situation is having a significant impact on public opinion. Newspapers have printed more direct criticism of government officials than in the past. Tajiks in both rural and urban settings have become been more willing to openly express their dissatisfaction with the government. The recent suggestion by Dushanbe's Mayor that Tajiks donate 50% of their May and June salaries to help finance a hydroelectric dam project highlights the degree to which government officials have lost touch with public sentiment.

Signifying Something?

16. (SBU) Comment: In his April 25 address to the joint session of parliament, President Rahmon recognized that lack of food security

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was a problem. He played the "civil war card" by reminding people of what happens when the country is not unified. The fear of igniting tension keeps Tajiks from openly advocating for change, and allows the government to continue dysfunctional policies. Tajikistan's worsening food security situation will test the conventional wisdom. Without substantial and immediate assistance from the international community, Tajikistan's worsening food shortage could lead to political instability. End comment.

JACOBSON